

NORTH PACIFIC RIGHT WHALE SURVEY 2002: NOAA SHIP McARTHUR WEEKLY REPORT

22 August 2002

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SCIENCE SUMMARY: Thursday, 15 August - Wednesday, 21 August

There is good news and bad news this week, all wrapped around what is turning out to be that most important of forces out here... the weather. First, the good news. We had glorious (by Bering Sea standards of August) conditions to finish off our survey of the shelf break and slope, starting at 56 N on Thursday and finishing at 58.3 N on Saturday. Sure, it was overcast and fog was thick at times, shutting us down for an hour here or an hour there. Yes, the rain drizzled down on us occasionally. But the wind was low and seas just about non-existent, with visibility averaging 4 nm or so during these days. We made a point of crossing the break and slope areas multiple times, zigzagging our way back and forth as we headed northwest - in doing so we passed over all kinds of interesting topography - with high hopes. Strangely though, we saw relatively little in the way of cetaceans. Dall's porpoise is king out here without question. Fin whales occurred in clumps but generally thinned as we moved north. Everything else was rare - an occasional humpback, and a few good looks at sperm whales, nothing else at all. Both humpbacks and sperms offered tempting opportunities to try for biopsies and photos, especially given the good weather, but it was this very thing, the good weather - and the fear of losing it, that kept us on our visual survey for the right whale. (Got to look while the looking is good.) As a result, we have no biopsy or photo-id report for the second week in a row. And the elusive right whale still eludes us -- the prize for the best sighting of the week goes unequivocally to an adult Short-tailed Albatross seen on Saturday evening (this species is rare enough but most birds seen in the Bering Sea are juveniles - an adult is the rarest of the rare). Runner up goes to the lamprey that came up in the Tucker Trawl on Friday evening and tried to latch on to Jan's unprotected arm.

The acoustics component of the project got into high gear during these days. Retrievable sonobuoys have been deployed and recovered each night and following morning, and junior officers have honed their ship-handling skills, as we have been retrieving these from the *McArthur* (with significant help from the Deck Department). Allan continues to break all records with his success rates at getting these things to receive signals, with his skills in mending sonobuoys with parted wires, and with his ability to function on less and less sleep. On Sunday early morning, he recorded a suspicious call - in the magic range of 50 Hz (a little low for right whales but hey... we're not quite but almost desperate), with many calls of lower frequency (read fin whales). So, we took the morning to drop more sonobuoys and localize the signal. The clues led us to the shelf edge where a fog wall met us, preventing much in the way of visual searching. After turning around to head back to the track, we found a fin whale some 7 nm away - intriguing...

That was the first part of the week. On Sunday, just as predicted, a low pressure system rolled into the area and our weather luck was up. We ran to the Pribilofs and spent the next three days hiding behind St. Paul Island with the wind spiking regularly to 30 knots and rain sleeting down. Though the weather was dismal, most everyone got ashore for a few hours to see the fur seal

rookeries and seabird colonies in the driving wind and rain, and to drink a mocha at the village's only coffee shop. Since then it's been reading, working on the computer, and riding the stationary bicycles, with the lure of non-stop movies playing below at all times of the day.

At the hour of this writing, we have left our anchorage and are once again out in the wind and seas left behind by the low to the east of us. Our goal is The Box, where we have a little more than a week to find the namesake of this project. But we have the brightest and the best aboard ... at least we have a good attitude ... stay tuned.

SIGHTINGS AND EFFORT SUMMARY FOR MARINE MAMMALS:

Date Start/Stop Time Lat Long Total NM Av. Beaufort

081502 0844 N55:57.90 W169:58.75 128.6nmi 3.5
2230 N56:25.27 W172:54.68
081602 0923 N56:29.30 W173:01.76 128.3nmi 2.4
2230 N58:04.83 W174:48.06
081702 0908 N58:19.07 W175:12.42 78.4nmi 2.6
2158 N58:02.30 W173:39.27
081802 1009 N58:05.23 W173:47.92 41.2nmi 4.2
1403 N57:41.68 W173:22.83

081902 Weather avoidance, St. Paul Island, Pribilofs

082002 Weather avoidance, St. Paul Island, Pribilofs

082102 Weather avoidance, St. Paul Island, Pribilofs

Code	Species	Tot#
44	Dall's porpoise	43
46	sperm whale	4
70	unidentified rorqual	1
74	fin whale	22
76	humpback whale	1
78	unidentified small whale	1
79	unidentified large whale	1

TOTAL 73